A Simple 3-Board Door

by Bob Smalser

...but on a boat, not a barn.

I've always believed the various woodworking specialties would be well served to cross-fertilize more. Want to learn to bed hardware perfectly? Learn from a stockmaker. Want to achieve perfection with card scrapers on expensive and fragile, highly figured wood? Watch a luthier. Restoring original finishes? A museum furniture conservator is the bomb. Bending wood? A traditional boatbuilder or chairmaker, of course.

This simple little door below is an excellent example. Were it for something in your kid's room, you could build it in three or four cumulative hours. But for a boat, two plus days is closer to the mark. Why so long? The additional steps required to make it weatherproof are the small part. The big part is that almost nothing is square, plumb or perfectly symmetrical on a boat. Everything has to be fitted in place.

This refit project from a 1969 Oregon is as well made as any, with Honduras mahogany frames, old-growth Douglas fir stringers, chines, beams and carlins, first-rate Douglas fir marine plywood, and all bronze hardware. Excellent professional workmanship and no expense or effort was spared in the structure.

But boats are basically wood bent around a mold, with the curves faired with wooden battens and in some cases by eye. The measure of the parts is symmetrical to the eye, but not anything you can take to the table saw. That door opening, originally designed for ¼" plywood, looks great—but the right door frame is a whole quarter of an inch off in angle from its left counterpart, and the centerboard trunk is 3/16" to port of the center of the opening.

I had to begin at the bottom and fit each board individually—and the rough stock had to be laid up oversize accordingly. This particular boat's quality construction is worthy of something better than just a sheet of plywood stuck in there, so I high-graded (ripped out the defects) and laid up 2" wide quartersawn strips of old-growth, air dried Western red cedar planking stock rejected and left over from last year's boat.

The defects were largely carpenter ant holes. Cedar is soft, and because I didn't want to change the original construction of the door opening and its ¼" slots, I laminated the laid up cedar with epoxy to Luan doorskin, as a cedar edge that thin would be easily split out with a minor bump.

Yeah, I know—laminating solid stock to plywood is asking for trouble, both from the potential of splitting and cupping, should the outer solid wood become wetter than the stable plywood on the back and expand. But no wood I've ever used is as stable to moisture as this old quarter-sawn cedar—I encapsulated the cedar in epoxy topped by more coats of spar varnish on the front than back—and I'll take my chances, as I couldn't find a better use for those short pieces of leftover tight-ringed, high-resin cedar I refuse to make kindling of. It's been complete over a month now in the hot sun and cool rain as I finished the project (yes, I set it out in the weather—if it's going to fail, better to fail now than when its needed) and I don't think I'm going to have a problem. These doors are important as they can prevent swamping in a storm.

The edges that fit in the quarter inch slots are coved, and each board is beveled to shed water away from the cuddy interior when installed, as does the weather stripping.

The cap is Honduras mahogany screwed down with contrasting purpleheart bungs. I can't really hide those bungs without darkening the finish, which would fade in the sun, so I might as well make them decorative.

The port hole is weather-stripped Lexan® with contrasting cedar trim...

...and a nice stainless steel locking hasp makes the final touch. And most importantly, if you look in the starboard cockpit bin in the first pic, you'll see a shock corded, easy-access storage rack for it for use when under way.